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RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE *founded on* Personal Persuasion.

A

SERMON

Preach'd at

BELFAST

THE

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RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE founded on *Perſonal Perſuaſion.*

ROM. xiv. 5.

——*Let every Man be fully perſuaded in his own Mind.*

THERE have been, in every age of the church, different ſentiments among chriſtians concerning points both of belief and practice; and it cannot be reaſonably hoped that it ſhould be otherwiſe while *we know but in part.* Diverſity of judgments is a natural conſequence from human imperfection, which cleaves to believers as well as others: and ſince our capacities, means of information, and diligence, beſides many other things, which have an influence on the underſtanding, are ſo unequal, is it ever to be expected we ſhall perfectly agree in our opinions? But muſt the peace of the church on that account be broken? Then it could never poſſibly be preſerved, and all the rules of the goſpel concerning it would be impracticable, indeed mere inſignificancies; for they muſt

depend on a moſt precarious, nay impoſſible Condition. But certainly our bleſſed Redeemer was not wanting in his care for neceſſary order and harmony among his ſervants: we may therefore ſafely conclude that ſuch an agreement in ſentiments is no part of that neceſſary order, ſince he has made no proviſion for it. On the contrary, all the directions which he and his apoſtles gave about charity and forbearance, ſuppoſe differences to remain among chriſtians: indeed they are ſuch, as if we did conform our ſelves to them, there would be an end of unchriſtian debates and contentions, not in an exact unanimity of judgment and uniformity of practice, but in *charity, which is the bond of perfectneſs.*

My Text has an immediate reference to the diviſion between the *Jewiſh* and *Gentile* chriſtians, about the obſervance of the *Moſaical* rites. The *Jews*, even after they were converted to chriſtianity, not only retain'd a great affection for their antient uſages, but were perſuaded the law enjoining them was of perpetual obligation: it is probable too, they had an exceſſive veneration for the cuſtoms received by tradition from their fathers, which were founded on no divine inſtitution at all. But whether the miſtake took its riſe from the one or the other of theſe cauſes, that is, whether they believed the ceremonial law was ſtill in force, or weakly imagin'd themſelves bound to obſerve the traditions of the elders, the conviction of their own minds was their rule, and their conſciences directed them to the diſtinction they made between *meats* and *days*. On the other hand, the *Gentiles*, who never had been under the yoke of *Moſes*'s law, or the conſtitution of the *Jewiſh* church, were by their firſt inſtructions in chriſtianity ſo far from any injunction to obey, as to be taught their freedom from that heavy burden, and the reaſon they had *to ſtand faſt in their liberty, and not to be intangled with the yoke of bondage*; tho charity in ſome caſes might direct them to wave their privilege, and comply with their weak brethren for avoiding offence. Thus far however the difference was innocent; tho in ſuch caſes truth muſt always be on one ſide, and error on the other. And here the miſtake was on the part of the *Jews*, retain'd too with obſtinate prejudice againſt the convincing evidence of plain goſpel-declarations, confirm'd by a multitude

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of miracles, eſpecially the gift of the ſpirit, *by the hearing of faith without the works of the law.* At laſt the diſſentions of theſe parties grew to ſuch a height as to affect their charity and chriſtian communion, not by the natural tendency of difference in opinion, but from the *luſts of men that war in their members.* He who was well inſtructed in goſpel liberty, and neglected the abrogated diſtinction of *meats* and *days*, deſpis'd his brother who was *otherwiſe minded*, as weak and ignorant; and he on the other hand, was cenſured by him as profane, for treating with contempt things which ſeemed to be ſtill ſacred by divine appointment, or by a venerable eccleſiaſtical cuſtom. Then the holy Spirit ſaw it needful to interpoſe; and by his direction the apoſtle lays down ſuch rules, as if duly obſerv'd wou'd perpetuate concord among chriſtians in that and all parallel caſes. The ſum of them is this: The ſervants of our Lord muſt not preſume to judge or condemn one another, ſince all muſt ſtand before his tribunal, and there *receive according to what they have done in the body:* they muſt not venture *to judge before the time*, or declare any out of his favour for profeſſing opinions, and uſing practices, wherein it is impoſſible for men to know they act inſincerely: nor muſt they make arbitrary incloſures within the church of Chriſt, the doors of which are, according to his will, left open to all his true diſciples; nor form themſelves into ſects diſtinguiſhed by peculiar tenets and uſages: ſuch as we cannot know to be unworthy of God's acceptance, we ſhould not judge unworthy of our fellowſhip, but receive them as brethren into chriſtian communion, and not exclude them by the rigid teſt of an exact agreement in doubtful and diſputable points.

The words of my text are a ſtrong inforcement of this peaceful and charitable demeanour of chriſtians one towards another: for if every man, in order to his acceptance with God, ought *to be fully perſuaded in his own mind*, then ſurely it is reaſonable they ſhould be left to their own freedom, and not compell'd by methods of violence to act with a gain-ſaying or doubting conſcience; which is the plain tendency of ſevere reproachful cenſures, and an excluſion from the privileges of fellow-chriſtians. In ſuch caſes, to judge and to reject thoſe who are *weak in the faith*, is to act directly againſt the

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will of God, and againſt the intereſt of true religion: for God requires that his *people ſhould be willing*, and that his ſervice ſhould be their choice upon full conviction; and therefore while they ſtruggle with their remaining infirmities and prejudices, and are growing up by degrees from error into the knowledge of the truth, he bears with them, communicating light as they are capable of it. This was the way our bleſſed ſaviour treated his diſciples, who on many occaſions appear'd *ſlow of heart to believe* the truth, and indeed were poſſeſs'd with ſtrong prejudices againſt it: yet he never thruſt them away from his ſociety for their ignorance and errors, but exercis'd patience towards them, till at laſt under his gracious care, and by his meek and compaſſionate inſtructions, they arriv'd at mature knowledge. But, ah! how unlike the ſpirit of their great maſter? When he *went to receive a kingdom to himſelf*, his ſervants began to rule over their fellow-ſervants with rigour; they muſt be beaten into their duty, and even the underſtanding of it by the terrors of excommunication, and the wrath of God denounc'd againſt them, not for acting contrary to the *perſuaſion of their minds*, but according to it: truth, or what is judg'd ſo by men, muſt be forc'd upon them whether they can receive it or not; and for the ſake of what church-guides are pleas'd to call decency, (taking their notions of it too much from this world) a ſtrict compliance in things confeſſedly unſcriptural, at leaſt uneſſential, muſt be rigorouſly enjoin'd.

But I deſign to conſider the words which I have taken for the ſubject of this diſcourſe, not only as they are of uſe to chriſtians in their ſocieties, recommending charity and mutual forbearance, but as a direction to every man ſingly: and they contain this important doctrine, That *religious obedience is founded on perſonal perſuaſion.* We have all of us to do with God, and every man at laſt muſt give an account of himſelf in particular. It concerns us therefore to govern our ſelves by ſome ſteady principle, which may give us confidence towards our great Lord at his appearance: It is from him we are to expect our reward, and what may pleaſe him ought to be the only point in queſtion with his ſervants: The deciſions of men are not infallible declarations of his mind, and we cannot be ſafe in ſubmitting

mitting to them abſolutely: Tho our doing ſo may ſecure us againſt the reproaches of the world, yet it will not be a ſufficient defence againſt the reproaches of our conſciences, or the diſpleaſure of God.

The apoſtle rather recommends another rule, namely, *the full perſuaſion of our own minds*; I ſuppoſe it will be allow'd he means a perſuaſion concerning the truth of what we profeſs, or the lawfulneſs of what we do. To imagine that we are neceſſarily determin'd to a particular opinion, as if he had ſaid, Let every man have a right perſuaſion, and let his ſentiments be exactly agreeable to the truth, otherwiſe he ſhall not be accepted: I ſay, to imagine this, were to make the rule entirely uſeleſs, becauſe it cou'd never be applied, and to contradict the plain deſign of the whole chapter. For he all along ſuppoſes a difference both of judgment and practice to remain; and yet teaches that it will not affect the ſtate of any man with reſpect to the favour of God. *For the kingdom of God is not* (the eſſence of chriſtianity does not conſiſt in, and our acceptance does not depend on) *meat* and *drink*, (any external obſervances, or abſtaining from them, or mens different opinions concerning them) *but righteouſneſs, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghoſt. For he that in theſe things ſerveth Chriſt, is acceptable to God, and* (ought to be) *approved of men*, ver. 17. 18. I think therefore, it is certain the text muſt be thus underſtood: "All ſincere chriſtians have not attain'd to an equal meaſure "of underſtanding, nor can be, after their moſt impartial inquiries, of the ſame ſentiments in every particular: But let none be ſhock'd in their charity towards others, or in the hopes of their own acceptance on that account. Let every man enjoy the "freedom of following the light of his conſcience, and "no chriſtians carry their zeal for agreement ſo far, "as to break in upon the eſſential condition of our "title to God's favour, which is acting ſincerely according to the inward conviction of our minds."

The apoſtle's rule, according to this plain ſenſe of it, is ſo evident, ſo perfectly agreeable to the invariable reaſon and nature of things, and to the declarations of the goſpel, not a few texts only, but the general deſign and tenour of the chriſtian revelation; that one would think there ſhould be no debate concerning it. But the

intereſts and paſſions of men dividing them into parties, and engaging them to purſue other ends than purely thoſe of religion, have given birth to ſtrange inventions, and been able to raiſe ſuch clouds as involve the moſt obvious important truths in thick darkneſs. I ſhall therefore think it not unneceſſary to illuſtrate by ſome arguments what the ſpirit of God has here ſo clearly taught us.

But before I come to that, I ſhall,

I. Explain the nature of the perſuaſion which is here required, and whereby a man muſt hope to be approved of God, and juſtified to himſelf.

II. I ſhall conſider the proper object of our perſuaſion; or what things they are, concerning which we muſt be perſuaded. And then,

III. I ſhall endeavour to illuſtrate by ſome arguments the apoſtle's doctrine in my text.

I. I am to explain the nature of the perſuaſion which is here required, and whereby a man muſt hope to be approved of God, and juſtified to himſelf. We ſhall fatally miſtake, if we think our ſelves ſafe in following every raſh and indeliberate judgment, the haſty ſuggeſtions of a vain unguided imagination, or of irregular deſires and paſſions: ſuch a conduct is ſo far from being either rational or religious, that it is the perfect reverſe of them both: Inſtead of pleaſing God, it is the greateſt affront to his authority, and to act, or rather to be acted by the impetuous fury of a blind and brutal impulſe, inſtead of *being perſuaded in one's own mind.* Every one that underſtands the actings of his own ſoul, and ſeriouſly reflects on its powers, knows what difference there is between being *perſuaded*, which is an aſſent form'd upon evidence and attentive reaſoning, and an indeliberate determination without evidence, and without enquiry. It is true, in the aſſent of our minds to, or diſſent from any propoſition, we are wholly paſſive, being neceſſarily and inevitably determin'd by the evidence which appears to us. It is not in our power to refuſe, or ſo much as ſuſpend ſuch an aſſent or diſſent; not from any faulty impotence, but, as far as I can ſee, from the eſſential frame of the ſoul it ſelf, and in that wherein by the very conſtitution of

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our nature we have no liberty, there can be neither moral good nor evil. But ſince we know by experience, and the ſcripture teaches us, we are apt to run into miſtakes thro inattention, and the ſecret influence of our affections and paſſions; it muſt be our unqueſtionable duty, as it is indeed the beſt uſe we can make of our reaſon, to guard againſt theſe ſprings of error, eſpecially in the judgments and reſolutions we form concerning points of faith and obedience to God; which being of the greateſt importance to our ſalvation, the freeſt exerciſe of our underſtandings is requir'd in them, that we may ſerve God and promote our own happineſs as becomes rational creatures.

From hence I infer two neceſſary conditions of that perſuaſion which only will render us acceptable in the matters of religious belief and practice. *1ſt*, That it be deliberate; for ſudden and raſh concluſions without duly weighing the reaſons upon which they are founded, and what evidence there may be on the oppoſite ſide, are the reproach of intelligent natures, ſuch as ours; which not being capable to comprehend at one view the reaſon of things, muſt therefore proceed leiſurely, and ſupply, as far as we can, the defect of capacity by ſerious conſideration. *2dly*, Our perſuaſion ought to be unprejudiced, free from paſſion or the influence of any conſideration, except that which ſhould rationally determine us; that is, in the preſent caſe, any thing but the pure evidence of the mind and will of God. When forreign motives are brought into the counſels of the ſoul, and it inclines to one ſide of the queſtion in debate by the opinions of other men, by worldly intereſt, by the biaſs of its own corrupt affections, by a fond reſpect to preconceiv'd notions, which render it unwilling thro puſillanimity, pride or ſloth, to undergo the fatigue of an impartial examination, or bear the reproach of a diſcover'd miſtake; when any of theſe things, or others of a like nature influence the mind, it fails in its duty, and comes ſhort of that perſuaſion upon which alone it can act with ſafety.

But if thoſe two conditions are duly obſerv'd, I do not ſee what more can poſſibly be required according

to the essential constitution of our souls, or according to the gospel, to our acting with confidence as approved to God and to our selves; for acting according to a persuasion thus qualified is the very essence of *sincerity*; by which only it is that any of the sons of men can *assure their hearts before God:* It must be confess'd, that none of mankind can attain to it perfectly in this world; we are still obnoxious to errors of judgment, and failures in practice through inattention and prejudices, irregular appetites and passions, the weakness and vices of the mind, of which we shall not be altogether divested in this imperfect state. But yet such an upright disposition, I mean, such prevailing degrees of it (and I have shewn wherein it consists) may be attained, as will not only render us acceptable to God, but afford us sufficient ground of confidence that we are accepted: for otherwise one end of the gospel revelation would be defeated. Our Saviour *spoke*, and his apostles *wrote* to christians that *their joy might be full*; John xi. 11. that they might know they have a title to *eternal life:* John v. 13. but *that joy* and *knowledge* they could have no other way than by an inward testimony of their sincerity; and sincerity may be known in the manner I have mentioned, or which is the same thing, acting habitually according to the *persuasion of our own minds*, in the sense of the apostle, and so far as the present infirmity of human nature will allow. He is a sincere person, and may enjoy the comfortable assurance of his sincerity, who in opposition to his worldly interest, and the sinful inclinations of his heart, faithfully endeavours to do the will of God, and to abstain from every known sin, who willingly and with a ready mind embraces every discovered truth, and renounces every discovered error, and who continually labours to find out his remaining sins and mistakes, that he may reject them; such a person, I say, is sincere, and may know himself to be so, though there are still defects in his sincerity through the unseen and unallowed influence of the corrupt motives of his heart. This seems to be the only just foundation upon which a man can act in the matters of *conscience* so as to please God,

God, and have a *witneſs in himſelf*; and happy is he who is *thus perſuaded in his own mind.* But ſurely none is able to judge of it except every man's own conſcience: 'tis there the pleaſures of ſelf approbation are felt, and the pains of a reproaching heart. *No man knoweth* thoſe *things of a man ſave the ſpirit of a man which is within him:* We may indeed ſometimes, even in judging of our ſelves and the *perſuaſion of our minds*, be embarraſs'd with difficulties and ſcruples, which generally take their riſe from the influence of wrong motives; but a conſiderate perſon will find, in conducting himſelf by this rule, that freedom of thought, not hurry'd by the Violence of the imagination and paſſions, that undiſturb'd tranquillity, which he knows to be the happieſt ſtate of his mind, it's very health and ſtrength.

You may obſerve the peculiar force of the apoſtle's expreſſion, *Let every man have a Plerophory*, or as it is very well render'd in our tranſlation, let him *be fully perſuaded:* the matter being of the greateſt importance, let him in all caſes of conſcience uſe his utmoſt endeavours to obtain the greateſt certainty he can poſſibly arrive at: let him not content himſelf with a ſlight and ſuperficial examination: for all the induſtry he can uſe is required, and nothing leſs will bear him out. Not that we can expect an equal degree of evidence in all caſes of duty and of conſcience; we muſt be ſatisfied with ſuch a meaſure of it as the nature and circumſtances of the thing will admit, and in diſputable caſes we ought to chuſe that ſide on which the greateſt clearneſs lies. Thus we can never be under a neceſſity of acting *againſt* or *without* conviction; for a ſincere ſoul will always find a refuge either in doing or forbearing, and it may be hoped an impartial and patient enquiry will iſſue in a perſuaded judgment and firm reſolution. But in every caſe let a man preſerve his own liberty inviolable, and not be induced by reſpect to men or any worldly conſideration, while he is perſuaded on the contrary, or while he *doubts*, *to eat meats or abſtain from them*, to *obſerve* or *neglect days*; in fine, to do or forbear any thing that falls within the wide ſphere of conſcience, wherein the laſt

decision of *his own* understanding must be his immediate Rule.

II. *I am to consider what is the proper object of our persuasion; or, what things they are concerning which we must be persuaded.* And 'tis plain from the occasion and scope of the apostle's discourse, he speaks of things which are not essential to christianity, but yet matters of conscience. The *Jewish* and *Gentile* christians were agreed in the fundamental doctrines and the great duties of religion. There were no debates among them concerning *faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and repentance towards God*; only they differed about ceremonial injunctions, which some thought were still in force, others that they were abolish'd. We may therefore infer, that in all parallel cases, the same rule takes place; that is, in all cases wherein the reason of men and the sincerity of christians permit them to differ. For can it be imagin'd that the apostle would by the direction of God's Spirit, give such a solemn decision upon a debate arising among christians, wherein he only applies a general rule to a particular case; and yet not intend that the same rule should be apply'd in other cases exactly parallel, and where the reason of it equally holds? Or can any one think, that in the different judgments and practices of the primitive christians about *meats* and *days*, no man or society of men should impose on others, but every man ought to be fully *persuaded in his own mind*; and in other things of a like nature, wherein conscience is as much concern'd, no such freedom was to be allow'd? We may therefore in all such cases act *with confidence* according to our *best light*; for 'tis plainly the doctrine of my text, That sincerity or following our *own persuasion* with the necessary qualifications I have mention'd, will render us acceptable to God, even tho *that persuasion* should be in it self wrong. The direction was given to the *Jewish* as well as *Gentile* converts, to those who *erred* as well as those whose judgments were *better inform'd*, and might be safely followed by both; for I can never believe they would be not only *allowed*, but *required* to act according to their *persuasion*, which

which was indeed an erroneous one, (I mean, that of the *Jews*) if at the ſame time there was any reaſon to fear the error of that *perſuaſion* would be imputed to them or hinder their acceptance with God.

If it be ſaid, our opinions cannot alter the nature of things, and that God having revealed his will to us, requires our conformity to it, according to *its real meaning* and deſign, and not according to *our own* miſtaken notions; might not the ſame objection have been made to the apoſtle in the caſe which he clearly decides againſt it? But indeed it is founded on a miſtake, as if God did abſolutely require of us, as the condition of pleaſing him, an infallible certainty in underſtanding his word, and the ſtrict conformity of our ſentiments to the truth. If it were ſo, how unhappy would the condition be of the beſt upon earth, ſince all are liable to errors? And God knows, they are inevitable; whereas he chiefly regards ſincerity, and wherever it is found, he approves it. It is the ſubjection of the ſoul to the light of conſcience, that is, the laws of God as we underſtand them, and regulating our actions by it, that pleaſes God. The determination of the judgment whether right or wrong, does not depend on our choice, and can be under no law, any further than that we are indiſpenſably bound upon pain of the divine diſpleaſure to an impartial examination, and to the regular exerciſe of our own faculties (as far as that falls within the direction of the mind it ſelf) for diſcovering, and in receiving truth. The apoſtle has determined this as plainly as words can do it in the very caſe of the text, for in the 14th verſe he ſays, *I know and am perſuaded by the Lord Jeſus, that there is nothing unclean of it ſelf:* there the truth of the matter is declared; as if he had ſaid, the *Jews* indeed have no ſufficient reaſon for obſerving the diſtinction of meats; for that is entirely abrogated now under the goſpel: but then he adds; *to him that eſteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean*; tho his opinion cannot alter the nature of the thing, yet 'tis a rule to him; and in diſregarding it, that is, in acting againſt the light of his conſcience, his guilt is as great as if the thing was unclean of it ſelf.

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But though I have ſaid what is very evident from the ſcope and connexion of the apoſtle's diſcourſe, that in this text, the things wherein our full perſuaſion is required are things of an inferiour nature, not fundamental doctrines and precepts of chriſtianity; yet in matters of the higheſt importance we cannot poſſibly be accepted without *perſuaſion*. To ſay we could, would be in effect to ſay, we may be ſaved by a *meer profeſſion* and a courſe of external actions, that is, by hypocriſy; which is ſo far from being true, that on the contrary, nothing is more hateful to God. 'Tis certain indeed, that no man to whom the goſpel is declared is an infidel without a crime; but his ſin does not conſiſt in the error of his judgment, but in the attachment of his heart to his luſts and worldly intereſts, whereby he is miſled and prejudiced againſt the truth. And this perfectly agrees to the doctrine of our Saviour himſelf; who pronounces judgment againſt unbelievers becauſe of their ſin, *He that believeth not, is condemned already*, John iii. 18. But in the words immediately following, he explains the reaſon of the condemnation, and ſhews what is the eſſential malignity of unbelief, *And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkneſs rather than light; becauſe their deeds were evil*, ver. 19.

I ſhall in the 3d place *Illuſtrate by ſome arguments the apoſtle's doctrine in my text.*

1. Let us attend to what our own underſtandings will naturally ſuggeſt to us on this ſubject. Religion according to our moſt obvious notions of it, is a *reaſonable ſervice*, perform'd to the ſupreme intelligent being, who obſerves the moſt ſecret thoughts of his creatures in order to recompenſe them. If we ſhou'd ſuppoſe, that God does not know, or does not regard the operations of our minds in the homage we pay him, the eſſential foundations of all duty to him are deſtroy'd; but no one can believe that, who has any fear of God left in his heart. It follows therefore that in proportion to the concurring exerciſe of our rational powers, ſo is the ſincerity and the acceptance of our religious profeſſions and actions. If an external

external work, which deliberately perform'd, and with conſent and preſence of mind, would pleaſe God, ſhould be done without deliberation and deſign, it is no more pleaſing, nor entitles to a reward, than if it were not at all done, or done by another perſon. For certainly what God requires, is the obedience of men, that is, of intelligent creatures; to do any thing under the notion of ſervice to him, without the approbation of our underſtandings, is not to ſerve him at all, but indeed to affront him, and to debaſe our ſelves beneath the dignity of our nature, by neglecting to improve our reaſon, which is our greateſt excellency, to the moſt valuable purpoſes for which it was given us, the glory of our creator and our own happineſs. In affairs of far leſs moment, we find our ſelves oblig'd to ſee with our *own eyes*, and act according to our own *perſuaſion*; though it may be convenient to conſult with perſons reputed wiſe, the laſt determination ſtill is in our ſelves, and it cannot be otherwiſe if we are free agents. Actions done with freedom and underſtanding, and they only are human actions, and thoſe alone which proceed from a conviction that God requires and approves them, are religious. 'Tis impoſſible by the very frame of our nature, that the laws of God ſhould bind us otherwiſe than as we underſtand them; which is ſo far true, that *invincible ignorance* diſcharges from all obligation to obedience; therefore our *own perſuaſion* muſt be the immediate foundation upon which we act: and whatever guilt may be in erroneous judgments, as they take their riſe from prejudice and inſincerity, they are ſo far a rule, that to contradict them in practice, is the *greateſt profaneneſs*; for the divine authority directly obliges the conſcience, and he who does not conform himſelf to it's light, equally rebels againſt God, whether his belief be right or wrong.

2. Tho it is not properly the deſign of the goſpel to teach us this doctrine, becauſe it is a principle of reaſon and natural religion, which the chriſtian revelation ſuppoſes; yet 'tis evidently agreeable to the ſcope of the ſcriptures, ſo that according to them neither faith nor obedience can be without it. Our

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bleſſed Saviour addreſs'd his inſtructions to men individually, and call'd upon every one to conſider for himſelf, what he was to believe and what to do, that he might be acceptable to God. 'Tis certain, his religion could never have obtain'd in the world on any other foot than that of liberty, and a right in every man to conduct himſelf in matters of conſcience by the *perſuaſion of his own mind*; for mankind were almoſt univerſally prejudic'd againſt it, and the ſecular and eccleſiaſtical powers vehemently oppos'd it. Now, what ſhou'd a perſon do in ſuch a caſe to whom the goſpel was preach'd? he muſt either reſign his underſtanding and conſcience to be directed by others, or put on a reſolution to weigh the pretenſions of our Lord impartially, and the arguments which ſupported them, that ſo he might believe and profeſs and practiſe according to the beſt light he could attain to: the former of theſe methods would for ever keep him out of the kingdom of God, and perpetuate his averſion to chriſtianity; the latter wou'd naturally lead him into it.

Now, may I not venture to affirm that the principle, upon which alone men could become chriſtians at firſt, is a good one, a ſcriptural one, and ought ſtill to be allow'd among chriſtians, with all its juſt conſequences, and to be applied in all caſes in which it bears an application; that is, in all caſes wherein conſcience is concern'd? For can it be thought our bleſſed Redeemer would draw men into his ſervice by perſuaſion only, *the bands of a man*, allowing them the freeſt exerciſe of their own underſtandings, which afterwards they muſt renounce, and be put under the power of fallible mortals like themſelves? or wou'd he have the great eſſentials of his religion enforc'd only by *perſuaſion*, and yet allow a rigid impoſition in inferior points, wherein an error is infinitely leſs dangerous, yet in the leaſt of them to act againſt conviction is *damnable?* We find the apoſtles after their bleſſed maſter's aſcenſion, when by the infallible guidance of the holy Spirit which was granted them, they fully

fully inſtructed the churches in the ſublime points of divine revelation, and *leaving the principles of the doctrine of Chriſt, went on to perfection*, never us'd any other method, than that of argument and perſuaſion; leaving every man to judge for himſelf, and to believe and practiſe as he had ſufficient evidence to determine him. They never forc'd light on *weak believers*, (that is, they never forced profeſſion againſt light, for real conviction cannot be forc'd) or compell'd them by meer authority, but wou'd have the ſubjects of Chriſt captivated only by reaſon; and till they obtain'd a ſufficient meaſure of knowledge, they muſt be allow'd to follow their own imperfect light, without being upbraided or cenſur'd for it. The principal caſe in which chriſtians at that time were of different opinions, was that to which my text refers: and here you ſee the apoſtle aſſerts in the *ſtrongeſt terms*, the neceſſity of *perſonal perſuaſion*. And this doctrine he teaches uniformly in his other writings. In the epiſtle to the *Philippians* he ſpeaks to the ſame purpoſe, and probably on the ſame occaſion, chap. iii. 15, 16. *Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwiſe minded, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheleſs, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the ſame rule, let us mind the ſame thing.*

3. Every man has, or may have, a ſufficient evidence of this in himſelf. 'Tis commonly and very juſtly ſaid, that vertue carries its own reward with it, in the inward ſincere joys and ſatisfaction, which attend the practice of it. This is a ſanction which God has added to his laws, ariſing from the very conſtitution of our nature; ſo much the more powerful, becauſe 'tis conſtant and immediate in its application. No ſooner a good action is done, *than a man is ſatisfy'd from himſelf*; pleaſure ſprings up in his mind and a ſelf-applauding joy, which a *ſtranger cannot intermeddle with:* no ſooner a trangreſſion is committed, but preſently judgment is pronounc'd, and puniſhment inflicted in the conſuming torments and anguiſh of a *reproaching heart*. Now the force of theſe preſent rewards and puniſhments, which are one great motive to religion, eſpecially depends on *perſonal perſuaſion:* for conſcience is a *monitor* as well as a *judge*; it always gives ſentence according to its own light and not *another's*. No man

ever felt any *wounds of ſpirit* for acting contrary to the deciſions and judgments of other men, while he himſelf was not convinc'd by them, and while he preſerv'd a due regard for the light of his own underſtanding; no man ever poſſeſs'd the comfort of ſelf-approbation, and the *teſtimony of his conſcience*, by complying with the ſentiments of others, while he acted againſt his *own*. This argument founded on experience, which can never fail, becauſe it neceſſarily ariſes even from the [illegible]ake of human nature, is alſo confirm'd by expreſs te[illegible]s of ſcripture. The apoſtle's *rejoicing was the teſtimony of his conſcience*, 2 Cor. i. 12. And to the end that others might enjoy the ſame ſolid and laſting conſolation, he preſcribes this general rule, *Gal.* vi. 4. *But let every one prove his own work, and then he ſhall have rejoicing in himſelf alone, and not in another.* How ſhall a man have rejoicing in himſelf by proving his own work, unleſs he approves it to himſelf, that is, to the light of his own conſcience, *the perſuaſion of his own mind.*

The great prejudice againſt this doctrine, is, that it ſeems to ſap the foundations of human authority, at leaſt extreamly to weaken it, and narrow its province, by exempting from its juriſdiction all matters of conſcience, or whatever may be *ſo call'd* by men allowed the utmoſt liberty of judging for themſelves; and if every one may do what is good in his own eyes, how ſhall order be preſerv'd in the world or in the church? Let us conſider this objection impartially: in order to which it may be divided into theſe propoſitions, which I think containthe whole ſenſe of it. Firſt, According to the principles I have laid down, matters of conſcience are not under human juriſdiction; for if every one ought to act according to the *perſuaſion of his own mind*, no man is to be determin'd by the deciſions of men; and conſequently in theſe caſes all are exempted from human authority. Secondly, That every man muſt judge for himſelf what is properly a matter of conſcience, and is not accountable to, nor can be reſtrain'd in ſo judging, by any power on earth. Thirdly, The liberty which this ſeems to allow, being boundleſs, for there is not any thing wherein conſcience may not be pleaded or pretended; if ſuch a plea be ſufficient, it wou'd ſeem to make void all obligation on ſubjects to obey any human authority whatſoever. And, to

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compleat the argument, they repreſent this as ſo great an abſurdity, that becauſe of it we ought to reject the principle from which it is inferr'd. This is the ſubſtance of what has been the moſt plauſibly offer'd againſt the right of every chriſtian to act according to the *full perſuaſion of his own mind in matters of conſcience:* but I muſt own it does not appear to me convincing, and of ſufficient weight to determine us to depart from a principle which is ſo evidently founded on ſcripture and reaſon. I ſhall therefore, as a concluſion of this diſcourſe, by conſidering theſe propoſitions I have mention'd, further explain the apoſtle's rule in my text, and ſhew how it affects, or ſeems to affect, the juſt exerciſe of human authority, civil and eccleſiaſtical.

As to the firſt propoſition, namely, *That matters of conſcience are not under human juriſdiction*; it is not only a plain conſequence from the text, but the very deſign of it: for the apoſtle would have no chriſtians, or ſociety of chriſtians, pretend to call their brethren to account for their conduct in theſe things, or exerciſe any power over them; and for that end he eſtabliſhes this maxim, That every man ought to be *perſuaded in his own mind*; from which it evidently follows, that no man can be ſafe in a blind ſubmiſſion to the deciſions of others, whatever authority they have, or in whatever ſtations they are plac'd. If ſuch a ſubmiſſion had been the duty of chriſtians, why wou'd not the apoſtles have enjoin'd it, ſince it muſt have determin'd all their differences? Why wou'd he not have propos'd ſo eaſy an expedient as that their governors ſhould meet in council, and having maturely conſider'd the points in controverſy, give judgment in which all ought to acquieſce? Or rather might he not have demanded an univerſal obedience to his own apoſtolical authority? But ſo far from the leaſt inſinuation of any ſuch method for peace, that on the contrary, when in this very chapter he declares his own *perſuaſion* concerning the matters in debate, which he does in the ſtrongeſt terms, *I know and am perſuaded by the Lord Jeſus there is nothing unclean of it ſelf*, ver. 14. at the ſame time he allows every man to follow the light of his private judgment. For indeed conſcience has a *ſupremacy* in it ſelf, I mean ſo far as not to be ſubject to

any *tribunal* upon earth; it acknowledges *no ſuperior* but God, and to him alone it is accountable: if it were otherwiſe, our obedience wou'd not be to God but to men.

The ſecond propoſition, That every man muſt *judge for himſelf what is properly a matter of conſcience*, is neceſſarily imply'd in the nature of conſcience, and muſt be allowed in order to eſtabliſh to every man the real privilege of following his *own perſuaſion*. Conſcience is nothing elſe but the judgment of a man concerning himſelf and his own actions compared with the law of God, and as ſubject to his authority. Now how is it poſſible that one man ſhould determine for another, how far this judgment ſhall extend, and to what inſtances? To limit and preſcribe to it, is, in effect to deny it altogether. If one man *eſteemeth* (that is, judgeth there is ſanctity in) *one day above another, another man eſteemeth every day alike*; ſhall the former of theſe be decided by the latter, and make his opinion a rule, while he is not convinced in *his own mind?* That is really to ſay, he ſhall reſign his underſtanding, which is not in any man's power to do; he ſhall judge and not judge at the ſame time; he ſhall believe contradictions. And if others muſt determine for us what are matters of conſcience, our privilege of following our *own light*, will be brought into a very *narrow* compaſs, indeed reduced to a mere ſhadow: for upon that abſurd ſuppoſition, what defence can be made againſt the moſt grievous uſurpations? Thoſe who exerciſe the moſt arbitrary authority over the very underſtandings and conſciences of men, have no more to do than declare that the matters wherein they preſcribe and give laws are not matters of conſcience, and under that pretence enforce the greateſt ſeverities.

It wou'd ſcarce be neceſſary to inſiſt on ſo plain a caſe, but that this is the very pretence under which all impoſitions on conſcience ſcreen themſelves. The name of conſcience is ſacred and venerable among men, at leaſt among chriſtians: There are few who will own any ſuch claim as that of dominion over it, or that they make any encroachments on its rights: but then they ſay it muſt be circumſcrib'd within its proper bounds, and authority muſt not be ſhamm'd by humo

humour and hypocriſy, under the ſpecious pretence of mens acting according to their private perſuaſion. Thus ſome alledge there is a ſufficient liberty reſerv'd to conſcience if no deciſions are made by men againſt the ſcriptures rightly underſtood: Others that human authority in the affairs of religion is only to be exerciſed in modes and circumſtances, in which caſe the plea of conſcience is not to be regarded; for 'tis really groundleſs. Now to all ſuch pretences, and all invaſions of the eſſential chriſtian rights of private judgment, however colour'd and diſguis'd, I wou'd only oppoſe the *ſolemn queſtion* which the apoſtle puts in the verſe preceding my text, *Who art thou that judgeſt another man's ſervant?* Who but the ſearcher of hearts can tell whether the plea of conſcience is real or not? For men to ſay it is not, is to enter into the ſecrets of other mens hearts, and take upon them to judge what God alone can judge. Or, if the meaning be, that againſt ſome human deciſions there is no real plea of conſcience, that is, there is no ground for it; what can this ſignify, but that in their opinion it is ſo? but can the opinion of one man, or any number of men, be a rule to another? then we might forſake the apoſtle's rule, and no more inſiſt on our right to be *every man perſuaded in his own mind.*

I cannot but obſerve that in the debated caſe among the primitive chriſtians, to which my text immediately refers, there was as great appearance of reaſon for neglecting the pretence of conſcience and attributing it to prejudice and obſtinate humour, as can well be ſuppos'd in any other. What ground had the *Jewiſh* converts for their alledged *diſtinction* of *days*, or for the purity of ſome *meats*, and the impurity of others; the inſpired teachers of chriſtianity had ſufficiently ſhow'd them all ſuch things were aboliſh'd, under the goſpel; God himſelf did interpoſe by many miracles to demonſtrate *the power of the word of truth* in oppoſition to the weakneſs of the law, and its ceremonies; nay, the apoſtle do's expreſly declare his perſuaſion that *nothing was unclean of itſelf.* How would impoſition triumph, if it had ſuch advantages on its ſide, and with an impetuous clamour run down all reſiſtance, imputing it to unaccountable peeviſhneſs never to be ſatisfy'd? But the holy apoſtle was acted by *another ſpirit*

ſpirit; he held the right of private judgment to be *ſacred*, and *inviolable*, that every man's conſcience muſt be a rule to himſelf, and ſo far a rule to others, that no encroachments muſt be made upon it.

The only queſtion now remaining is, thirdly, *Whether this liberty do's make void all obligations on ſubjects to obey human authority.* It muſt be own'd, agreeably to the principles I have aſſerted, that no determinations of human power can in any caſe bind the conſcience, which is immediately ſubject to the authority of God alone. Its voice is to be heard, and its dictates obeyed againſt all the decrees of men that oppoſe them; which is really no more than to ſay that *God is to be obeyed rather than man.*

'Tis true, that ſometimes the laws of God and men coincide, ſo far as to enjoin the ſame external actions; and that we are bound to obey the juſt commands of our ſuperiors, *not only for wrath, but alſo for conſcience ſake*; yet it will not follow, that even in theſe caſes human authority binds the conſcience: which is apparent from this plain conſideration, that the ſame principle of conſcience *equally* obliges us to duties wherein no human power do's interpoſe, as in the relation of equals, and to acts of charity: nay, conſcience lays as ſtrict an obligation on rulers to perform their duty to their ſubjects, as on ſubjects to obey them. But no more in the one caſe than in the other, is there any authority *over* conſcience: for conſcience does *equally* oblige the magiſtrate to grant the reaſonable requeſts of the ſubject, and the ſubject to obey his lawful commands. 'Tis true likewiſe that there is nothing in the whole compaſs of human life and affairs, but what may ſome way fall within the wide province of conſcience; and thus far men in whatever ſtation have no right to determine ſo as by their authority to oblige others. Yet that do's not hinder but that ſome of the ſame things may in *other reſpects*, and on *other* accounts, not as matters of conſcience, be ſubject to human ſuperiors, and properly be govern'd by them.

To ſet this matter in a clearer light, we ought to conſider diſtinctly the two kinds of human authority; *civil*, and *eccleſiaſtical*. The firſt is an *ordinance of man* very agreeable to the will of God, for the excellent purpoſe of preſerving peace and order in civil ſocieties;

cieties; and muſt be ſuppos'd to be furniſh'd with *ſufficient powers* for anſwering that end. But magiſtrates have no more authority than any of the reſt of mankind (that is, they have no proper Authority at all,) in matters of conſcience *as ſuch*; they cannot by their laws oblige their ſubjects to receive any propoſition as a truth of divine revelation, or do any action as a duty to God: for in theſe caſes it is eſſentially neceſſary, that we ſhou'd profeſs and practiſe purely out of reſpect to God, and wherever any pretended weight is added to his Authority, in ſo far as *that* is regarded, it really diminiſhes from the *ſincerity* of obedience, and conſequently is a real prejudice to true religion. But this does not in the leaſt impair the magiſtrate's juſt power, who has ſtill enough reſerv'd for his care, even the whole extent of outward human actions which regard the publick peace. Under that conſideration alone they are proper for his cognizance, and he has ſuch an authority as no pleas of conſcience can ſuperſede.

As to *eccleſiaſtical authority*, we cannot judge of the nature and deſign of it better than by the accounts which the apoſtles give us of *their own*; for it will ſcarcely be alledg'd, there is any church-power greater than *theirs was*. Now they tell us, they had *no dominion over the faith of chriſtians*; and conſequently *none* over their conſciences. For tho we commonly diſtinguiſh *matters* of *conſcience* into matters of *faith* and of *practice*, yet really, *faith* extends to the whole compaſs of duty; for *whatſoever is not of faith is ſin*. They (the apoſtles) expreſly ſay, the *power given them was for edification*; which being the proper end, explains the nature of it. A power for edification is a power to promote truth and ſincere religion, which can never be promoted by mens being obliged to act *contrary* to the inward conviction of their own minds, or *without it*; therefore the apoſtles muſt be underſtood to have diſclaim'd any authority obliging chriſtians in ſuch a manner. And from hence we may ſee the juſt limits of church-power: its deciſions bind the conſcience as far as men are convinc'd, and no farther; any higher claim of authority not only cannot be inferr'd from the *deſign* of *eccleſiaſtical power*, according to the

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ſcriptures, namely, edification, but indeed is utterly inconſiſtent with it.

I do not ſpeak of that which is not only the right, but the indiſpenſable duty of chriſtians, to ſeparate from the fellowſhip of thoſe *who are called brethren and walk diſorderly*, that is, as the apoſtle deſcribes them, 1 *Cor.* v. 11. *Fornicators, covetous, idolaters, railers, drunkards, extortioners*; or who in any other like inſtances notoriouſly tranſgreſs the *plain* and *eſſential* precepts of Jeſus Chriſt: for the apoſtle exhorts the *Corinthians* to *put away* the inceſtuous perſon *from among them*; and aſſerts their right (which is the common right of all chriſtian churches) ſo far as to *judge them that are within*. This power, which really is of *ſelf-preſervation, in ſo far as it affects* the guilty, canonly puniſh their ſcandals, not their ſins; and has of it ſelf no other *proper* and *immediate* tendency than to produce an external reformation, not real religion, which wholly depends on the authority of God, and the motives of another world. But will it at all follow, that becauſe we ought to deny the tokens of chriſtian communion to thoſe who *ſin againſt their light*, and are *ſelf-condemn'd*, therefore we ſhou'd alſo deny them to ſuch as walk according to their light, tho different from ours, in points that are not *eſſential*? Becauſe the rules of the goſpel direct us to ſeparate from thoſe who are *openly* ſcandalous and profligate in their lives, doing thoſe things which the *common ſenſe* of mankind condemns; therefore we may alſo ſeparate from ſuch as differ from us, in things wherein the reaſon of men and the ſincerity of chriſtians *permit* them to differ? In the *former* of theſe caſes, the apoſtle requires the *Corinthiuns* not ſo much as *to eat* with the diſſolute and immoral: in the *latter*, the ſame apoſtle requires the *Romans* to receive the weak into the greateſt intimacies of their religious fellowſhip. Or finally, becauſe to preſerve the external purity of a viſible church, marks of diſgrace are put on ſuch abominable actions, (agreeably to the general prevailing ſentiments of mankind, who have annex'd honour and diſhonour to the actions which have the outward appearance of vertuous and vicious) can it be juſtly inferr'd that *mere eccleſiaſtical authority* is ſufficient to determine points of conſcience, ſo that

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any thing ſhall commence good or bad, duty or ſin, only by its declarations, and a man may reſt ſatisfy'd in them without the *perſuaſion of his own mind*?

I confeſs ſuch as are of opinion that any man or ſociety of men have any ſuch authority lodg'd in their hands by our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, not only may, but are bound to acquieſce in *their* determinations; and like this probably was the caſe of the *judaizing* chriſtians, who obſerv'd ſome days, and other ceremonies, *merely* on the ſcore of tradition, which during their weakneſs was a rule to them. But this is ſo far from proving that *eccleſiaſtical power* does *properly* and *of itſelf* bind the conſcience, that indeed it demonſtrates the contrary: for in all ſuch caſes the only foundation upon which a man can act conſcientiouſly, is his *private perſuaſion*; it limits and circumſcribes the extent of human authority, and is not limited and circumſcribed by it. If a deciſion of men binds any perſon, 'tis in matters wherein *he thinks* they have power: when they carry their pretenſions farther, determine things wherein his judgment does not allow their authority, their decrees muſt be regarded *by him* as void; and conſequently if any one's conſcience diſallows human authority in the loweſt inſtances wherein 'tis exercis'd, its acts can produce no obligation upon him; elſe the rights of private judgment may be invaded in all caſes, and conſcience given up to the will of men: for it is as really injur'd if a man be forc'd to act *againſt* its light in a *circumſtance*, as in an *article* of *faith*; and in the leaſt things, he *that doubts is damn'd* if he complies. From all which it is apparent, that *eccleſiaſtical authority* has no power over conſcience; indeed none at all but what conſcience *gives* it, and therefore muſt yield to *its ſuperior*, whenever their voices differ.

The Direction given to the *Corinthians*, *Let all things be done decently, and in order*, 1 Cor. xiv. 40. is alledged by many to be a ſufficient foundation for the churches power in points of external order. But what thoſe points are, even proteſtants are not agreed: ſome extend them to *ceremonies* and *modes* of worſhip, which are neither expreſly commanded nor forbidden in the word of God; others limit them to the *natural circumſtances* of actions: Upon theſe different opi-

nions, different ſchemes of *eccleſiaſtical conſtitutions* are erected. Without entring into this debate, I ſhall only make ſome remarks to explain that text, as far as it has any relation to my preſent ſubject; whereby it will appear, that no proper authority, however limited in ſome chriſtians, binding others *againſt* or *without* the *perſuaſion of their own minds*, is founded upon it.

Firſt, the rule is preſcrib'd to the members of the *Corinthian* church, concerning themſelves and their own actions, and no authority committed to *ſome* over *others*. The ſame perſons who had been guilty of the diſorders and indecencies, mentioned in the preceding part of the chapter, are in the concluſion required to do all things, *decently and in order*; not the leaſt inſinuation, as if the governours of the church were entruſted to execute the apoſtle's precept, far leſs that they were to be the *ſole judges* of what is decent, and the people *indiſpenſably* oblig'd to ſubmit to their determination. Common ſenſe itſelf and diſcretion (ſetting aſide the chriſtian vertues, which will incline men to a regular behaviour in all things) are *ſufficient* to ſecure the *outward decorum* of aſſemblies, which only the Apoſtle is there ſpeaking of; and there is no need of a *proper juriſdiction*. He do's not ſo much as once mention authority, nor at all enforce his direction by it; but all along argues from ſuch plain reaſons, as all are equally judges of.

Again, there is not in *that chapter*, nor *any where elſe* in ſcripture, either precept or example for excommunications or any other *eccleſiaſtical cenſures* to be inflicted for what the *church may think* indecent, or what is really *in itſelf* ſo. Theſe are things of an inferior nature, not to be put in ballance with the weightier matters of religion. The Apoſtle in the ſame epiſtle exhorts the *Corinthians* to avoid the infectious company of ſcandalous perſons; and when one in their communion was guilty of *inceſt*, they muſt *purge out the old leaven*; but for irregularities in their congregations, tho thoſe they committed were very groſs, he contents himſelf with adviſing them to reform; not a word of rejecting the guilty or debarring them from *any part* of chriſtian communion, therefore *eccleſiaſtical power* in matters of *decency* and

order,

order, muſt be perſuaſive only; ſince according to the laws of Jeſus Chriſt, its appointments have no ſanctions added to them.

It is of dangerous conſequence for the church to lay *too great ſtreſs* on points of apprehended order, as if they were *equal* to the great chriſtian vertues; and tranſgreſſors againſt the *one* and the *other* to be treated after the *ſame manner*; for thus men are led to overvalue things which are but inſignificant in compariſon, and place a great deal of religion in them, or to diſeſteem the very vitals of chriſtianity, as if they were more important than the *arbitrary* and *variable* actions of *human* contrivance, or the more uncertain appointments of *human* prudence.

And laſtly, let it be conſider'd how a *proper* and *abſolute* authority in *ſome* chriſtians to determine and oblige *others* to ſubmit to their determinations in points of order, can conſiſt with the rights of private judgment, which belongs to all chriſtians, and which proteſtants zealouſly contend for, as the *eſſential principle* of the *reformation*. For let us ſuppoſe, that governors make a decree perſuant to the powers they claim, and the perſons affected by it *cannot* in conſcience comply, or *declare* they cannot; either authority muſt ſtop, or conſcience be trampled on; either *ſome* muſt judge for *others*, what is a point of mere order to be ſubmitted to, and what is a *ſinful impoſition* to be reſiſted; and who dare truſt them, unleſs he knows they are infallible? or elſe, every man muſt judge for himſelf: The *former* is a popiſh principle, the *latter* deſtroys a proper eccleſiaſtical power, which ſhall bind conſcience *even* in the matters of *order* and *decency*.

And now, to conclude: Since it is ſo evident that our Lord Jeſus Chriſt has not only granted all his diſciples the privilege, but ſtrictly enjoin'd them to enquire into his will revealed in the goſpel, that from thence they may learn what to believe and what to practiſe, and without ſubmitting implicitely to *human declarations* and deciſions in any point of *faith* or *duty*, may by following impartially their own light, the full *perſuaſion of their own minds*, obtain his approbation: let us uſe this privilege and obey this precept, having always a *cloſe* and *immediate* regard to him;

and

and as being accountable to him only, not to me
let us *ſtand faſt in the liberty wherewith he hath made*
free: let us *call no man* or ſociety of men our maſte
for *one is our maſter even Chriſt, and all we are brethr*
On this foundation alone we ſhall have *confidence*
wards him, and boldneſs in the day of Judgment.

FINIS.